

1829  
Circular  
Epistle  
Concerning  
The  
Covenant

PAPERS  
OF  
SHAKERS

89

NEW YORK  
New Lebanon

This handwriting  
unknown to me whose,  
I think there is another copy  
in the <sup>It was it is not</sup> meeting house in  
the handwriting of Elder  
Rufus, in the Ministry at that  
time or from 1821 to 1852.

Circular Epistle. Sept. 1829.

Concerning a Revision of the general Covenant.

The Ministry and Elders of the Church at New Lebanon,  
to all who feel an interest in the prosperity of Zion, and claim a  
relation to the only Gospel of salvation, in this day of Christ's second  
appearing.

Dearly beloved gospel friends,

Since it hath pleased God to call us by his grace,  
and make us partakers of the blessed Gospel of this latter Day;  
to be distinguished in a sinful world as a righteous and holy  
people, and to find our true relation to Christ and to each other  
by our faithful obedience to the testimony of the cross; and  
since, through the operations of divine wisdom, the treasures  
of the Gospel have, in a special manner, been committed  
to our trust, we feel that we have a special duty to dis-  
charge, at this time, which concerns us all, and to which  
we wish to call your particular attention. Feeling deeply  
interested in the increase of the Gospel, we desire to impress  
upon your minds a due consideration of certain matter,  
which, if rightly ~~understood~~ improved, will tend to increase  
our mutual strength and protection in the way of God, and

promote a spirit of union, order & harmony among Believers.

In the first place, we feel to express our thanks to God & to his chosen agents, that through all the sufferings, afflictions and sore tribulations which have attended the second manifestation of Christ, the everlasting truth has been more and more displayed; so that our souls can rest with calm & unshaken confidence on that sure foundation which, for more than half a century, has stood firm against all the storms of infidelity, vain philosophy, antichristian influence, and the more dangerous intrigues of false hearted brethren.

But notwithstanding so firm a foundation is laid, and so great a degree of prosperity has crowned the labors and sufferings of our pious predecessors and many of our cotemporaries, there is no provision made for us to lay aside our watchfulness and take our ease, and imagine that all is safe and beyond the reach of danger. Admitting, as perhaps we may, that our sacred profession has so far commended itself to the common protection of the civil authorities of our country, that but little persecution or opposition from without is to be feared; have we, as yet, gained that degree of internal order that will secure us from the danger of losing the path of social and spiritual

relation, as a consecrated people, bound together by an inseparable bond of union? Is there not rather increasing cause for care & watchfulness, lest by any means some may be gradually & imperceptibly corrupted and drawn aside from the simplicity of that faith which has been planted and nourished by our first founders, and from those wholesome rules of order which we have been solemnly charged to keep and maintain?

Considering, dearly beloved, the extent to which the Gospel has already spread; the many and various characters included in the profession of our faith and in the bonds of our fellowship; the boasted light and liberty that, at this age, greatly abounds among mankind, and with which the sense and feelings of many who are admitted among us are very full; and considering that it is natural for such to desire to be teachers, and to mingle their treasures of worldly wisdom with the self-denying and mortifying doctrines of the cross; we would ask, what security have we against all fear of degeneracy, on the side of popularity and a pretended increase?

It has been sufficiently testified, and we are fully convinced and satisfied that the Gospel has been introduced by that power and wisdom of God that all the united wisdom

of man cannot gainsay nor resist. And there still remain among us many living witnesses of the true increase of that wisdom, power and divine authority which, step by step, has led the simple & honest-hearted into that pure and peaceful order, harmony and visible prosperity, which has recommended the Gospel to all souls that truly desire salvation. Is it not therefore, of great importance frequently to call to mind the former days of Gospel light, instruction and discipline, and, as it were, to retrace in our memories the narrow path by which we have been led into the possession of this Heavenly treasure?

Believing, as we do, that the present state of affairs, both in the civil and religious world, as well as among the several branches of our community, calls us, unitedly & individually, to a faithful examination of our state; as a people, we feel it our duty to offer to all concerned, a brief address on the subject, and to call your mutual attention to what appears to be the special duty of the Day.

And in the first place, let it be remembered that it was not by a convention of politicians, a general assembly of divines, nor by the vote of a majority of republicans,

that the Gospel of Christ was introduced among us. . . But when all human wisdom had failed, and a divided world of professing christians were crying "Lo here, and Lo there!" When awakened souls, groaning under the bondage of a corrupt nature, feeling and lamenting the baseness of human depravity, were crying to God, day and night, for deliverance; then it was that one single mouth was opened by one eternal Spirit, to declare one only way of salvation & redemption, and one only door of entrance into one only kingdom of peace and happiness. From the lips of our suffering and ever blessed Mother that testimony has gone forth which will gather into one all things in Christ, whether in Heaven or on earth. Can it then be a matter of any doubt with us, whether the combined talents of proud mortals, or the spirit of Eternal truth is to point out the path of our justification, and dictate the plan of our association as a body? The fallen race of man; from the remaining rays of original light, and the improvements of human reason, may institute plans of government, and form laws for the regulation of civil society. But to regulate the work of God, as it respects the order of the Gospel and the

establishment of a spiritual kingdom on earth, no toleration can be given, nor any room be left for the clashing opinions and contrary senses of mortals to bear any sway.

Nominal christians, by their own sagacity, may frame their own creeds, enact their own laws, and form and transform into any shape that suits their own fancy. But when it is found that, in order to see the kingdom of God, there must of necessity be a new birth, — how is that birth to be brought forth? Who can be born without a mother? It is therefore a matter of the first importance with us that we should even realize our origin and descent, and acknowledge our relation to each other as children, not of the bond woman, but of the free, and, according to our age and experience in the Gospel, preserve the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

During the ministration of our blessed Mother Ann, her gift of wisdom and kind maternal spirit were all-sufficient to guide our infant faith, and lead our unexperienced feet in the paths of righteousness & peace. Her word, whether in person or by her messengers or ministers, was a law to all her simple and honest-hearted children. And when her dispensation of parental instruction was finished, it

was not left for her numerous offspring to settle by arbitrary appointment or by the vote of a majority, which of them should be the greatest. The nursing father stood ready in his place to receive the burden and weight of the solemn charge committed to him. The labors and sufferings of Father James Whittaker are never to be forgotten. Much is due to his faithfulness in superintending the concerns of the Society, in teaching, encouraging and strengthening the members, untill by experience and travail they were prepared to constitute a spiritual body, and bone come to its bone, and all the parts and organs of the living community commence their united operations.

We have all been well informed of the presiding gift, which, according to previous prophecy, was ~~rested~~ in Father Joseph Meacham, for the gathering of Believers into church orders. It is also generally known that this once unsightly & savage wilderness, now called New Lebanon, was chosen as the first consecrated ground for the establishment of the Church of this latter Day. And, as yet, there remain many living witnesses of the special gifts and orders that, from time to time were given for the regulation

of all matters, both spiritual & temporal; particularly for the establishment of a standing ministry, eldership, deaconship, trusteeship, and membership in every lot of care and mutual help throughout the body.

We may also call to remembrance the mutual sufferings and labors of our beloved Father Joseph & Mother Lucy, and all that were united with them in gaining that order which was then considered & acknowledged as a pattern & example to be followed by every association of Believers as far as the same work should extend.

It is also well known, and ought forever to be remembered, that from this place the law of Zion and the word of the Lord have gone forth to every place where the testimony of Christ's second appearing is supported. That is, ministers have been appointed and sent forth to open the testimony, and to instruct, lead and direct other souls, as they themselves have been instructed, led & directed; and they have always been considered responsible to the authority that sent them, for the faithful exercise of their office & trust. Through these means our cords have been lengthened and our stakes strengthened by an inward law of life and liberty, which binds us together like the spreading branches of a fruitful vine. And

our mutual faith and love are the only bonds of union that have been found necessary, as far as respects our relation to God & each other, as a separate & peculiar people. But with regard to our visible & external relation, as cognizable by the laws of civil society, and the use and disposal <sup>of our temporal</sup> interest, it has been and still is a matter of deep concern to us to maintain a consistent uniformity.

In every place we are subject to the laws of the country in which we live. Those laws claim the same control over our temporal interest as over the interest of other citizens. Our interest must therefore be secured to the use intended, upon lawful grounds. Hence it becomes indispensably necessary that our temporal interest should be legally secured in the hands of trustees; and that all our transactions, in thus arranging matters should be legal, and supportable in a court of justice & equity.

Laws are various in different states; and prejudices bear more or less sway every where. But in all countries mutual agreements and written contracts supersede the interference of civil authorities. Mutual agreements in things lawful is therefore our only resource for the defence of our civil rights. Hence arises the necessity of a written

covenant, and a particular statement of the general principles of our church order and form of government. But even this, when transformed into a legal instrument, without special care, <sup>is liable</sup> to be misunderstood & misconstrued, and to excite various sentiments even among good Believers, and lead to such diversity of ideas and forms of expression to suit the sense of the world, as may, if not carefully guarded against, eventually lead to unhappy divisions, and a sort of independence in the management of our temporal concerns.

Seeing then, that we are in reality but one people, taught and governed by one spirit, organized under one united ministerial gift, and constituted according to one order of government, we feel it our duty to recommend to your consideration the propriety and importance of having one explicit covenant, adapted to the general circumstances of each society, and containing one uniform statement of our principles of association, by which we may be able to assume one uniform ground of defense in all cases that may occur under the authority of our respective states, which boast the privilege and bear the name of United States.

With a view to accomplish this much desired

object, and to leave, at our decease, a little legacy for our beloved youth and junior brethren and sisters, who are moving forward to fill up the ranks of the present generation, as fast as they become vacant, we offer a form for your consideration, which according to our experience and observation, will be found to answer to the work in this place from the beginning, and which we deem neither dishonorable to the Gospel of Christ nor inconsistent with the laws of man.

It ought to be considered (and our western brethren and sisters should keep it in remembrance) that altho the senior institution at New Lebanon is a proper center for the general union, yet the great local distance of the societies in the western states from this place, requires a center of union in that quarter. And as the first opening of the Gospel, and the first establishment of church order, commenced at Union Village in the State of Ohio, by a regular emanation, in the gift of God, from the general center of union, it is proper in the order of God that the Society in Union Village should be the central Society, and the leading gift in that place, the center of union for all the branches of the Church in the western

states. The leading gift of that institution being regularly joined, and acknowledging the leading authority in the first center of union, will, of course, necessarily connect all the various <sup>branches</sup> to one center, like the branches of a flourishing vine to one root. This line of order ought to be stated in the written covenants of the different branches in the West.

Is a uniformity in all those external concerns which so frequently bring Believers in contact with the world, is very desirable, as it would contribute much to our strength and prosperity in the Gospel, and to our conquest over the spirit of the world; yet, we entertain no expectations that it can be obtained without our united exertions and faithful labors.

And we fully believe that so far as this proposition can obtain the united approbation of faithful Believers, it will effect one very important step towards this desirable object. Therefore, let the exertions be made in good faith, and the blessing of God will not fail to attend them.

There are some other matters which we feel it our duty to mention, and which must be gained before a general uniformity throughout the different Societies can be fully attained.

The first that we would notice, and which we consider a very important one, is that which relates to party spirit and party politicks. This is a subject <sup>with</sup> which Believers who mean to keep the way of God, and preserve their senses uncontaminated with the contentious spirit of the world, ought never to intermeddle. Our faithful and beloved Father James in his day bore a strong and decided testimony against this spirit; and we sincerely desire that it may be wholly excluded from among Believers. No one can indulge himself in it without feeling a growing and increasing bias of mind on one side or the other, which will imperceptibly tend to mar his union and shut the gift of God out of his soul. The evils which will eventually follow, we need not mention, as every considerate Believer will readily perceive what they are, and the extent and magnitude of their influence.

2. Liberty of conscience. As this is a sacred right, for the preservation of which the witnesses of God, in all ages, have suffered more or less, and for which Believers have always been very strenuous in their own cases, we think it may not be amiss to caution

them against the abuse of it in themselves, under a delusive idea that they are justly contending for this liberty, while in reality they are striving for their own wills. This some have done even to the striving against the gift of God in their Elders.

It is the duty of Believers to respect liberty of conscience in all, even in the subjects of Antichrist's kingdom. The law of Christ can never bind the conscience of any soul. But if any Believer, under a plea of conscience, is inclined to swerve from that path of Gospel order and rectitude which was pointed out by the Son of God, and clearly opened by Mother Ann, and now plainly marked out by the unerring principles of her Gospel, he ought first to examine himself honestly, and see whence this <sup>professed</sup> conscientious difference of faith and feeling arises, and whether it really came through faithful obedience to the genuine principles of the Gospel, and in consequence of honestly taking up a full cross against all sin and every kind of evil.

When this examination is truly and sincerely made, and the professed Believer still pleads a conscientious difference of faith, and really believes he can be justified

before God in violating those important principles which we feel bound to keep uncorrupted and unmarred, it then becomes his duty to withdraw peaceably from the Society, and gather his union with a more righteous and Godly people, if he can find them; and he will thereby manifest to the world the purity of his motives, and the honesty and sincerity of his religion. To us it is certain that in Christ there is but one Lord, one faith and one baptism, one body and one bread. Therefore, if Christ has appeared the second time, to gather all things into one, there can be but one faith, one body and one union; consequently, difference of faith and sentiments must separate souls from the union of that one body.

3. There is another subject of importance which we feel it necessary to notice. It is that which respects the introduction of new improvements and inventions into the Society. Some Believers, from their eagerness to seek out new inventions and search ~~for~~ after new discoveries, seem to think it a part of their duty to devote their faculties and the interest of the Society to these pursuits.

It is the unquestionable privilege of Believers

to gain an increase in faith and good works, and in every good gift that comes from God. But it is necessary that they should learn how and in what manner they are to increase; lest while they imagine that they are laboring for a profitable increase and searching after justifiable improvements, they should deceive themselves with vain pursuits after things which will eventually lead them into loss. They ought to consider that altho the work of God is a growing work, and the kingdom of Christ an increasing Kingdom, yet the work is of God and not of man; and this increase with all its improvements, is to be brought forth in the gift of God, and according to the order of the Gospel; not in the pursuit of our own ways, nor according to the imaginary ideas we may entertain of our own skill and talents.

It is therefore of essential importance to the maintenance of union & good order, that Believers, in all their labors for new improvements, whether in machinery, dress, manners or customs, should be careful to proceed in union; and by no means introduce new things into the Society without the consent and approbation of the Ministry and leading authority of

the Church.

Finally, beloved bretheren and sisters, farewel. Keep your faith unmarred, and walk in obedience to it;— keep yourselves unspotted from the world;— “avoid evil communications;”— cherish the bonds of your union as a dear and precious treasure; for it is your strength, and will necessarily lead you to more perfect obedience, and thereby protect you from the snares of the wicked one, and ensure the blessing of Heaven upon all your labors.

Accept this address as a token of our kind love and remembrance, and our fervent prayers for your union, blessing and prosperity in the Gospel.

New-Lebanon, Sept. 1<sup>st</sup>, 1829. From the Ministry & Elders.

N. B. After sufficient deliberation upon the proposed covenant, we shall be glad of a few lines, as soon as consistent, expressive of your opinion and feelings about it. As a few amendments from each Society, East and West, would probably occasion much labor in revising it over again, so as to

suit all parties, and perhaps protract the execution of it to an unexpected length of time, we confidently trust that good Believers will not undertake such a labor merely to display their talents. But if any thing worthy of notice should strike your minds, you will communicate it freely.

